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# The Symbolic Significance of the Houses in William Faulkner's "Light in August"

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The Symbolic Significance of the Houses  
in William Faulkner's Light in August

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by

Wendy Van Epps

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
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## ABSTRACT

In Gothic literature landscape and houses are conventionally used as outward and visible manifestations of a character's psychological state. Although the landscape of Light in August has received cursory attention, the special significance of the houses has been virtually ignored. A close examination of the text of Light in August reveals that Faulkner used houses not only in the classic Gothic manner, as a symbol of--or index to--the psyches of their inhabitants, but also as a means of amplifying several of the novel's important themes: the isolation and alienation of the individual, the search for identity, the significance of the community, and the perversion of formalized religion. Houses, especially bedrooms, kitchens, and the windows to various rooms, play a significant and long overlooked role in the novel. Their importance is underscored by the fact that Faulkner's working title for Light in August was "Dark House."

When Lena Grove and Joe Christmas leave houses through bedroom windows, they are leaving more than a house; they are escaping the ideology of the inhabitant. The isolation of the houses of Joanna Burden, Gail Hightower, and Doc and Mrs. Hines parallels the isolation and alienation of the inhabitants. As Byron Bunch becomes more involved with humanity he moves progressively from a boardinghouse to a tent to the open road. The perversion of religion to satisfy purely personal ends is seen in the perversion of the church services; the pulpit is used by the Reverend Hightower, Doc Hines, and by Joe Christmas as an opportunity to voice their personal fanatical beliefs. The list goes on and the implications are myriad. The many buildings of Light in August are richly symbolic and a comprehensive study of them is needed.

Gothic literature flourished only briefly, the publications of Horace Walpole's The Castle of Otranto in 1764 and Charles Maturin's Melmoth the Wanderer in 1820 generally being considered the beginning and the end of the classic period of Gothicism.<sup>1</sup> Although the heyday of this genre lasted less than sixty years, the various elements of Gothic fiction, such as the use of terror, the influence of the past, the dual psyche of the villain, the persecuted maiden, the question of the nature of evil, the emphasis on interior mental processes, and the symbolic use of houses, have continued to be utilized by modern authors.<sup>2</sup> This paper will focus on the Gothic convention of the house as symbol of the inhabitant, and explore William Faulkner's extensive use of this device in Light in August.

The setting of the Gothic novel, typically dominated by a Gothic castle which frequently was haunted, helps establish an atmosphere that is psychologically important. As Robert Hume observes:

[T]he imaginary world in which the action takes place is the author's objectification of his imaginative sense of the atmosphere. In other words, the setting exists to convey the atmosphere. . . . The Gothic novel uses its atmosphere for ends which are fundamentally psychological. . . .<sup>3</sup>

The early Gothic writers following Walpole, were well aware of the potential for the psychological symbolism of the castle, frequently using it as a symbol of--or index to--the psyche of the inhabitant.<sup>4</sup> As Leslie Fiedler explains the deeper psychological symbolism of the haunted castle,

Beneath the haunted castle lies the dungeon keep:  
the womb from whose darkness the ego first emerged,  
the tomb to which it knows it must return at last.  
Beneath the crumbling shell of paternal authority, lies  
the maternal blackness, imagined by the gothic writers  
as a prison, a torture chamber--from which the cries of  
the kidnapped anima cannot even be heard. The upper  
and the lower levels of the ruined castle or abbey  
represent the contradictory fears at the heart of  
gothic terror: the dread of the super-ego, whose  
splendid battlements have been battered but not quite  
cast down--and the id, whose buried darkness abounds  
in dark visions no stormer of the castle had even  
touched.<sup>5</sup>

The psychological conflict within the individual, then, is expressed in terms of the Gothic building.

The American novel had its beginnings during the period Gothic literature flourished abroad, and American authors such as Charles Brockden Brown, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Henry James often used symbolic settings in the Gothic manner. Although

the Gothic castle had vanished with the medieval setting, in its place stood a contemporary dwelling which served the same symbolic purpose. As Eino Railo points out:

Each age fashions this centre of suspense to conform with its own new experiences and inventions, but for the reader aware of its history it is an easy task to strip off the modern equipment, when it stands confessed as merely a new rendering of the old picture of the haunted castle.<sup>6</sup>

William Faulkner frequently used houses in this Gothic manner.<sup>7</sup> Although Faulkner's Gothic houses have been briefly mentioned by Francois Pitavy and Elizabeth Kerr in their respective works, Faulkner's Light in August and William Faulkner's Gothic Domain, a comprehensive study of them has never been accomplished. "Dark House," the working title of Light in August, provides a wealth of illustrations.<sup>8</sup> The dark house to which the title referred was of the Reverend Gail Hightower. Sitting in his study in the twilight each evening, he is as physically imprisoned by his house as he is mentally imprisoned by the past. The actual dungeon of the Gothic novel has been transformed into a psychological prison. The vision of his dead Grandfather so dominates Hightower's life that he is unable to function in the present. As the novel expanded, more characters and more dark houses were added.

The great plantation houses of the South provided a convenient substitute for the Gothic castle. As Elizabeth Kerr observes:

"The plantation house which, in its prosperity, had stood for the orderly life of a semi-feudal society, in its ruin and decay resembled the ruined castle in Gothic novels, symbolizing the collapse of the old order."<sup>9</sup> This is true of the Compson house in The Sound and the Fury, and the Sutpen mansion in Absalom, Absalom!, but Faulkner departs from the convention in Light in August. Joanna Burden's home was built by her abolitionist grandfather, and the Burden house therefore represents a threat to the old Southern social structure. The townspeople perceive this threat and view the house accordingly: "But it [the atmosphere] still lingers about her and about the place: something dark and outlandish and threatful. . . ."<sup>10</sup> Joanna, linked with the house in the minds of the townspeople, is never seen as an individual by them. She is "haunted," trapped by the past, like her house, her identity is fixed by her family's history.

The "dark and outlandish and threatful" atmosphere surrounding both the woman and house seems to doom them, and our first sight of the Burden home occurs after Joanna has been murdered and the house is burning. The pillar of yellow smoke from the house is described as "standing straight as a monument on the horizon" (p. 44), and "taller than and impregnable as a monument" (p. 277). Joanna's house is her monument; the two are linked in death as they were in life.

Joanna's relationship with Joe Christmas is defined in terms of her house, but the full significance of this relationship can only be understood after an examination of the houses in Joe's



early life and the psychological associations made with them. A chronological summary of Joe's life and psychological development is therefore in order. Joe spends his early childhood in a

big long garbled cold echoing building of dark red  
brick sootbleakened by more chimneys than its own, set  
in a grassless cinderstrewnpacked compound surrounded  
by smoking factory purlieus and enclosed by a ten foot  
steel-and-wire fence like a penitentiary or a zoo. . . .  
bleak walls, the bleak windows where in rain soot from  
the yearly adjacenting chimneys streaked like black  
tears. (p. 111)

Joe's experiences there figure importantly in the formation of his psyche, conditioning his attitudes towards people and events throughout his life. The echoes in the building emphasize its emptiness, a foreshadowing of the emptiness of Joe's subsequent life. The similarity of the orphanage to a penitentiary is expanded by the use of the word "compound," and by the description of the children as "orphans in identical and uniform blue denim" (p. 111). The repetition of the word "bleak" links the atmosphere of the building and the psyches of the children, and the "black tears" on the window strikingly emphasize the pathos of their situation. There is not even any grass in the hard "cinderstrewn-packed" yard, their house being surrounded by smoking factory chimneys. As Joe will continue to be after he leaves the orphanage, they are isolated from nature, from the community, and from life.

One of the first women in Joe's life is the dietitian at the orphanage. At first, Joe thinks of her merely in terms of food: "The dietitian was nothing to him yet, save a mechanical adjunct to eating, food, the diningroom, the ceremony of eating, . . . smooth, pink and white, making his mind think of the diningroom, making his mouth think of something sweet and sticky to eat" (p. 112). Joe sneaks into her room and discovers that she has sweet pink toothpaste which he naturally associates with her. For some time he surreptitiously enters her room, eats a single mouthful of it, and leaves. One day, however, the dietitian and her boyfriend return while Joe is in the room. Hiding behind a curtain, Joe mechanically eats most of the tube and makes himself sick. Not realizing that she was making love while he was in the room, he wants only to be punished for eating her toothpaste and vomiting: "[H]e was putting himself in her way in order to get it over with, get his whipping and strike the balance and write it off" (p. 115). When she finally confronts him, "[H]e believed that she was about to strike him. But she did not; the hand just opened beneath his eyes. Upon it lay a silver dollar" (p. 116). Joe's association of food, discomfort, enclosed spaces and the unpredictability of women begins with this incident and remains with him long after it is forgotten.

The next house in Joe's life, the McEachern house, further reinforces these associations. When Joe looks at his fosterparents' home one evening he makes the following observation: "The house squatted in the moonlight, dark, profound, a little treacherous.

It was as though in the moonlight the house had acquired personality: threatful, deceptive" (p. 160).<sup>11</sup> The adjectives used show Joe's attitude toward his foster mother. Like the dietitian, she confuses him by her unpredictability. After his foster father has beaten him for refusing to learn his catechism--a punishment Joe expects and accepts--Mrs. McEachern secretly brings him food: "dishes she would prepare for him in secret and then insist on his accepting and eating them in secret . . ." (p. 157). He rejects her by turning the tray upside down, "dumping the dishes and food and all onto the floor" (p. 145). He thinks with disgust of her attempt

to get herself between him and the punishment which, deserved or not, just or unjust, was impersonal, both the man and the boy accepting it as a natural and inescapable fact until she, getting in the way, must give it an odor, an attenuation, and aftertaste. (p. 157)

For Joe, it is women who love deceit and threaten the rigid predictability of a man's world.

While women are associated with food, enclosures, rooms and houses, Joe psychologically links men with the barn or stable and the outside world. This association also has its beginnings at the McEachern house. His whipping for his failure to learn his catechism occurred in the stable, and it was of that incident that he was later to think: "On this day I became a man" (p. 137). This early psychological association accounts for Joe's behavior the night before he murders Joanna: he rejects everything associated with

women. The confines of cabin and clothes are shed and he goes to the stable, where "Even a mare horse is a kind of man" (p. 101).

Joe's feeling of being enclosed or engulfed by women, and the accompanying image of a black abyss, occurs several times throughout his life. His sexual "initiation" takes place during his stay with the McEacherns, in a dark mill shed. As he looks at the young Negro girl "he seemed to look down into a black well" (p. 147). He feels himself "enclosed by the womanshenegro," a phrase which is repeated twice in the same paragraph. Joe feels trapped, enclosed by the She, and finds himself obliged to fight to free himself from this sense of confinement, fighting with the other boys until "There is no She at all now. They just fought; it was as if a wind had blown among them, hard and clean" (p. 147).

When Joe is a little older he leaves his foster parents' house secretively at night to meet Bobbie Allen, a waitress he has met, but their first meeting is unfortunately timed. Bobbie has forgotten that she will have her monthly period on the appointed day, and must explain the situation to Joe. When Joe first learned about menstruation, years before, he had fled to the barn, the male stronghold, where he remained for the entire day (p. 174). Several days later he kills a sheep, a sort of ritualistic propitiation. His "immunity" from this knowledge is short-lived, however, and he now jerks himself free of Bobbie and runs to the woods. There he crystalizes his impressions of women:

He reached the woods and entered, among the hard trunks

. . . hardfeeling, hardsmelling, invisible. . . . [A]s

though in a cave he seemed to see a diminishing row of  
 suavely shaped urns in moonlight, blanched. And not one  
 was perfect. Each one was cracked and from each crack  
 there issued something liquid, deathcolored, and foul.  
 (pp. 177-78)

With these impressions of women as containers or "victims of  
 periodical filth" (p. 173) firmly fixed in his mind, he meets  
 Bobbie regularly for a month, but they never enter her house. For  
 their lovemaking trysts they go "among the growing plants, the  
 furrows, and into the woods, the trees" (p. 178). The natural  
 imagery is in stark contrast to Bobbie's room, which is described as  
 "close, smelling of stale scent" (p. 183). When Joe first visits  
 Bobbie's room he brings her candy and they talk, but when he is  
 ready for sexual intercourse he suggests they leave the house and  
 return to the darkness and the woods. Bobbie is quite masculine in  
 appearance and Joe associates the masculine outdoors with her and  
 their sexual activities instead of the contamination he has associated  
 with enclosed spaces since the incident with the dietitian. He is  
 therefore astonished when he realizes that Bobbie intends to make  
 love with him inside the house. "Here? In here?" he queries (p. 183).  
 When Bobbie doesn't appear one evening Joe understands "that beyond  
 the dark shades of her room people were not asleep and that she was  
 not there alone. . . . He knew that there was a man in there with  
 her" (p. 186). His confrontation with her about this incident, when  
 he learns consciously what he already knows subconsciously--that she  
 is a prostitute--further reinforces Joe's association of women,

corruption, and houses, or any equivalent enclosure such as an urn or a pit.

His last visit to Bobbie's house again points out the contrast between houses, which he associates with women and corruption, and the outdoors, which he associates with men. After he knocks his foster father senseless at a dance, possibly killing him, he goes to Bobbie's house with the vague idea of running away with her. Bobbie scorns him, and he is ridiculed, rejected, and beaten. He thinks, "I got to get out. . . . into the air, the cool air, the cool dark" (p. 210). The sensation is identical to that of his earlier experience with the "womanshenegro" in the shed. Once outside the house "he entered the street which was to run for fifteen years" (p. 210), and then he entered Jefferson.

In Jefferson Joe meets Joanna Burden, and their relationship begins when he enters her house in search of food. He enters the house for the first time through the kitchen window, even though the main door is unlocked: "he seemed to flow into the dark kitchen: a shadow returning without sound and without locomotion to the allmother of obscurity and darkness" (p. 216). For Joe, the kitchen, the heart of the house has always been inextricably associated with women. Joanna and the house represent a sanctuary for Joe: he later thinks of her as "the woman at first sight of whom in the lifted candle . . . there had opened before him, instantaneous as a landscape in a lightningflash, a horizon of physical security. . ." (p. 221). He takes her physically that night in an act that can best be described as rape, and returns

to repeat the deed the next night.

He now expects to be hated and turned out of the cabin as well as denied access to the main house (p. 223). He thinks about leaving town, and yet the following night he goes back to her house. This time the back door is locked, but he persists:

He went to the kitchen door. He expected that to be locked also. But he did not realise until he found that it was open, that he had wanted it to be. When he found that it was not locked it was like an insult. It was as though some enemy upon whom he had wreaked his utmost of violence and contumely stood, unscathed and unscarred, and contemplated him with a musing and insufferable contempt. (p. 224)

Like the dietitian, Joanna has upset his expectations. He expects to be punished for breaking into the house and raping her; instead she sets out food for him and invites further sexual advances by leaving the house open. She receives the same treatment his foster mother received for interfering with his sense of guilt and expiation: Joe rejects her through the food; he flings it about the room. Joanna hears the commotion and throws the bolt to the rest of the house, denying him access to it and to herself. That episode concludes the first phase of their relationship, which Joe thinks of "as though he were outside a house where snow was on the ground, trying to get into the house . . ." (p. 254-55).

The second phase begins when Joanna makes sexual overtures

by entering his cabin and sitting on his bed. In this phase she abandons her Calvinistic teachings, her psychological prison, and gives way to her nymphomaniac passions. She craves the idea of illicit love, and for this reason Joe cannot enter the house normally: "for a whole week she forced him to climb into a window to come to her. He would do so and sometimes he would have to seek her about the dark house until he found her, hidden, in closets, in empty rooms . . ." (p. 245). The closets and empty rooms of her dark house are manifestations of her subconscious mind, the repressed portions of her psyche symbolically expressed.

As Joanna becomes wildly passionate, expressing her heretofore repressed sexuality, Joe feels the familiar sense of corruption, entrapment and enclosure. His earlier vision of the urn, women as containers of filth, is expanded here. He feels "as through he had fallen into a sewer" (p. 242), "like a man being sucked down into a bottomless morass" (p. 246), and as though "he was at the bottom of a pit in the hot wild darkness" (p. 255). As the second phase drifts into the final phase of their relationship the emphasis shifts from the corruption of women to Joe's increasing sense of confinement. He notices that now "they met always in the bedroom, as though they were married. No more did he have to seek her through the house . . ." (p. 249). Joanna has now become more soft and feminine, and believes she is pregnant, which would be the natural culmination of their frenzied sexual encounters. Joe, unable to accept this more normal male-female relationship, ceases to go to the house, avoiding the woman, the corruption, and the entrapment



of marriage. When he later receives her notes directing him to come to her, he believes that she now wishes to resume their relationship on his terms. He goes first to the kitchen, where he eats the food set out for him, and then mounts the stairs to her bedroom. Instead of the expected invitation to share her physical life he receives an offer to take over her business affairs as her secretary. Later, she offers to send him to a Negro law school. When these offers are rejected Joanna demands that he pray with her. As she becomes more obsessed by guilt and by the knowledge that her "pregnancy" was the onset of menopause, she reverts to her harsh, mannish appearance and behavior. There is now a strong resemblance between Joanna and McEachern: both are religious fanatics, harsh, demanding and judgmental. Joe can no longer enter the house at will and receive physical and sexual satisfaction. No food is now set out for him, and Joanna's bedroom door is locked both before his arrival and after his departure (p. 263). Joanna's menopause ended not only her physical ability to produce life, but her feminine instincts to nurture and to be loved. The total lack of such feminine desires is reflected by the empty kitchen and the locked bedroom door. She has become a stranger to Joe in this third phase, strangely reminiscent of Simon McEachern. Both have tried to lock him into respectability, imprison him by their fanatic religious beliefs. His reaction to both situations is similar: strike out and flee.

The night before he murders Joanna his feeling of being entrapped reaches a peak. As he walks through Freedmantown he is

surrounded by voices: "On all sides, even within him, the bodiless fecundmellow voices of negro women murmured." He feels "enclosed by cabinshapes" and decides "It was as though he and all other manshaped life about him had been returned to the lightless hot wet primogenitive Female" (p. 107). Freedmantown is described as "the black pit" which "might have been the original quarry, abyss itself" (p. 108). Throughout Joe's life, women and sex are equated with enclosed spaces. The dietitian, Bobbie Allen, and Joanna Burden have all represented confinement and corruption for Joe.

Joe's final confrontation with Joanna occurs in Joanna's bedroom. There she demands that he kneel and pray with her for forgiveness for their sexual sins. When Joe refuses, as he earlier refused to learn his catechism for McEachern, she threatens him with a gun. As Joe once stood and accepted his punishment from his foster father, he now stands and watches as Joanna pulls the trigger of the pistol (p. 267). The actual murder scene is not given, and when we next see Joe he is outside of the house, on the road, free from both woman and house.

Joe spends most of the next week, before his capture in Mottstown, in the woods (pp. 304-21). Earlier he ran to the woods in an attempt to understand menstruation and women. Now he spends his time trying to understand himself. He has escaped the psychological prison by the murder of Joanna, but now he finds himself trapped by the physical prison of his body and its needs. At first he craves food constantly. He thinks of the time he threw the meal Joanna had offered him on the floor "with a kind of

writhing and excruciating agony of regret and remorse and rage" (p. 316). Finally escaping that prison, too, he realizes "I don't have to bother about having to eat any more" and feels "peace and unhaste and quiet" (p. 320). In his flight from food and women, he has found peace outside and alone. He is now psychologically prepared to accept the punishment for his act, and wanders openly about the streets of Mottstown until he is recognized and captured.

Faced with life imprisonment, Joe escapes once again. Almost instinctively he runs to the Reverend Gail Hightower's kitchen, where he ends his flight and offers no resistance to Percy Grimm. Joe's life ends in the symbolic womb-tomb mentioned by Fiedler. The "allmother of obscurity and darkness," as the kitchen is described, is a fitting description of both. Joe's self-sacrifice in Hightower's kitchen frees him from his psychological and physical prisons, a decision he made while alone and in the woods.

Like Joanna, the Reverend Gail Hightower uses his house as a retreat from the community, where he remains in spite of its opposition. Like Joe, he tends to equate houses with women. As he thinks of his childhood home he associates it with his mother, particularly with her eyes: "He could feel them [her eyes] through all walls. They were the house: he dwelled within them. . . . He and she both lived in them like two small, weak beasts in a den, a cavern . . ." (p. 450). When he thinks of his youth he remembers:

[H]e had loved darkness, of walking or sitting alone among trees at night. Then the ground, the bark of trees, became actual, savage, filled with, evocative

of, strange and baleful half delights and half terrors. He was afraid of it. He feared; he loved in being afraid. Then one day while at the seminary he realised that he was no longer afraid. It was as though a door had shut somewhere. . . . He just hated it; he would flee from it, to walls, to artificial light. (pp. 300-301)

Life is unpredictable and uncertain, and Hightower flees from it to the security of a room. The housing imagery is deliberately used to cut him off from life, as his actual house would do later.

Hightower's house, his "sanctuary" (p. 293), is the original "dark house" of the unused title, and is unquestionably an index to the minister himself. The house, "unpainted, small, obscure, poorly lighted, mansmelling, manstale" (p. 44), is analogous to the unwashed man. Hightower sits in his window each evening "oblivious of the odor in which he lives--that smell of people no longer in life: that odor of overplump desiccation and stale linen as though a precursor of the tomb . . ." (p. 300). His rejection of humanity has left him spiritually dead. His house, like Joanna Burden's is his tomb, and the sign out front (p. 53: Rev. Gail Hightower, D.D./Art Lessons/Handpainted Xmas & Anniversary Cards/Photographs Developed), which he calls his "monument" (p. 52), is his tombstone.

His withdrawal from life into the twilight dream of his phantom grandfather is paralleled by his withdrawal into the study of his house. There in the security of his sanctuary, he can ignore the world of life outside his four walls. The closest he comes to the

natural world is the sounds of life which come in through his open window, serving as a constant reminder of the life he has rejected. Hightower's attitude toward rooms and the world outside, reverses Joe's. Joe associated rooms with confinement, contamination, and women, from which he would flee to the cool, free air outside. Hightower associates rooms with sanctuary and security, and he flees from the unknown to the safety of walls.

On occasions, however, the sanctuary of his room is violated by intruders. Dragged forcibly out of his home on one instance, he suffers a beating at the hands of the townspeople. He bears it "with that patient and voluptuous ego of the martyr . . . until, inside his house again and the door locked, he lifted the mask . . . ." (p. 464). Years later, when Byron, Doc and Mrs. Hines intrude on his solitude and ask him to commit himself to life by lying to save Joe, he adamantly refuses: "Suddenly his voice rises higher yet. 'Get out!' he screams. 'Get out of my house! Get out of my house!'" (p. 370). He refuses to leave the security of his room, and orders those who would disturb his mental sanctuary to leave. He prefers the predictability of the quiet life of the mind, dreaming of his grandfather's deeds within his study walls, to the uncertainty of life without them. He has been dead to the world for so long that it will not be an easy matter to change his psychological prejudices. Byron's presistence, in the form of weekly visits and extended talks, finally brings Hightower back into life. The minister leaves his house and becomes involved with another human being; he sets out to deliver Lena's baby.

It is in Hightower's kitchen, after the birth of Lena's child, that Hightower is reborn:

And as he stands, tall, misshapen, lonely in his lonely and illkept kitchen, holding in his hand an iron skillet in which yesterday's old grease is bleakly caked, there goes through him a glow, a wave, a surge of something almost hot, almost triumphant. . . . Life comes to the old man yet . . . (p. 382-83).

In the kitchen, always associated with women, Hightower has become a live human being, a man, once more. In a "glow of purpose and pride" (p. 383) he rejects the womanly chore of washing dishes and scorns returning to bed because "That's what a woman would do: go back to bed and rest" (p. 383). He does rest, but not in his bedroom. Hightower leaves his house and goes to his garden with Henry IV, which he considers "food for a man" (p. 383), in his possession.

Later that day he returns to the cabin to check on Lena and the child, and finds that "The walk out to the cabin does not take him as long as the walk home did, even though he goes now through the woods where the walking is harder" (p. 384). His return to life has taken him outside of his house, into his garden, and finally into the woods. Before he enters the cabin he glances at the grove of trees where Joanna's house had stood. From his vantage point he cannot see the charred and mute embers of the house; instead he sees the big house alive again, bursting with the noise and vitality of life, "noisy, loud with the treble shouts

of the generations" (p. 385). His vision of life all around him is an extension of his own psyche. He, too, has returned to life from death. He is outside the shell of his house, involved with someone other than himself. He has not accepted life in its entirety, however. It consists of more than birth and joy; life also includes pain and death. Life, like the ground and the bark of trees in his youth, is "actual, savage, filled with, evocative of, strange and baleful half delights and half terrors" (p. 300). Hightower, at this point, sees only the positive, vibrant things which correspond with his own euphoric state of mind. Joe's death, in his own kitchen, will return him to the full reality of life.

Hightower uses his church as a sanctuary from life, too:

He believed . . . that if ever there was shelter, it would be the Church. . . . [I]t seemed to him that he could see his future [in the church], his life, intact and on all sides complete and inviolable, like a classic and serene vase, where the spirit could be born anew sheltered from the harsh gale of living. . . . (p. 453).

Hightower's sermons reflect his inability to focus on the reality of his religion. He is as removed from it as he is from life:

They [the townspeople] told Byron how he [Hightower] seemed to talk that way in the pulpit too, wild too in the pulpit, using religion as though it were a dream. . . . It was as if he couldn't get religion and that galloping

cavalry and his dead grandfather shot from the galloping horse untangled from each other, even in the pulpit. . . . the dogma he was supposed to preach all full of galloping cavalry and defeat and glory . . . all mixed up with absolution and choirs of martial seraphim, until it was natural that the old men and women should believe that what he preached in God's own house on God's own day verged on actual sacrilege. (pp. 56-7)

Hightower eventually sees that churches, which he viewed as sanctuaries, are actually "barricades . . . against truth and against that peace in which to sin and be forgiven which is the life of man" (p. 461). The church is merely an empty building, a dark house, with no life inside. He also realizes

that that which is destroying the Church is not the outward groping of those within it nor the inward groping of those without, but the professionals who control it and who have removed the bells from its steeples. He seems to see them, endless, without order, empty, symbolical, bleak, skypointed not with ecstasy or passion but in adjuration, threat, and doom. (p. 461)

The present church stands squarely against life, including all natural physical appetites. McEachern and Joanna Burden exemplify the perversion of the Christian doctrine represented by the empty church. God's word is twisted to suit their personal ends:



McEachern uses it as justification for beating his foster child. He frequently admonishes Joe against the temptation of the flesh. His blessing before dinner contains not gratitude for the food, but a demand for "absolution for the food and for the necessity of eating it" (p. 144). Joanna Burden goes a step further and uses religion to justify attempted murder. Hightower himself uses religion to satisfy his personal desires, to live in Jefferson in the glory of his grandfather.

It is the intervention of Byron Bunch and Lena Grove, of life, that eventually brings Hightower to this realization. Lena also brings life to Byron. At the outset of the novel Byron has been a stranger in Jefferson, a transient resident, for seven years. His boardinghouse residence symbolizes his relationship with the community; he remains uninvolved and anonymous in his rented room. His initial encounter with Lena reflects his desire to stay separated from her and from life, uninvolved in Jefferson and the community. He wants her to be someone else's responsibility: "It just seemed to him that if he could only get her across the square and into a house his responsibility would be discharged" (p. 77). (It is interesting to note that the matron of the orphanage felt similarly about her involvement with Joe. When she hears from the dietitian that Joe is part Negro she wishes to rid herself of the responsibility. Her first thought is to place him in someone else's home at once.) Byron takes Lena to the boardinghouse, but she wishes a more permanent domicile, one associated with her errant lover. The first sign of Byron's psychological progress, his movement toward

life, is when he involves himself in her problem and cleans Joe's cabin, helping her to settle in it. He takes another step in the direction of life when he moves out of the confines of his rented room and into a tent placed a respectable distance from the cabin. As he becomes more determined to help Lena he gains confidence in himself, symbolically suggested by the fact that he no longer stumbles over the bottom step when he enters Hightower's house. Byron's attempts to establish Lena in a house are futile, however, and as the novel closes the two of them are on the open road. Byron's psychological progress, his movement toward others and life, is reflected by his relationship to houses: he moves from a boardinghouse to a tent to the open road. He has returned to life by rejecting the norms, the confines of the community--a steady job, a conventional relationship, and a house.

Lena Grove is the only character in the book who is not defined in terms of a house. She is the representative of natural, instead of social, life. Pitavy summarizes her importance as follows:

It is she who endures and prevails as the serene incarnation of eternal femininity and of the earth's fertility. On the day of Joe's death she gives birth to a child in whom he is symbolically reborn. She restores life to the sterile Burden land, as well as to Hightower, the living-dead, and to Byron, who was trying to isolate himself, working overtime at the mill to avoid the temptations of the Saturday holiday: the invincible Lena, a genuine natural force, drives the one from his

impregnable ivory tower and the other from his workshop-sanctuary.<sup>12</sup>

Early in the novel, Lena is described "like something moving forever and without progress across an urn" (p. 5). The image of the urn, which for Joe represented confinement and contamination, and for Hightower represented sanctuary from life, represents life itself for Lena, something neither walled in nor walled out. Her close ties to the natural world are reflected by the few houses in which Lena does stay. Her parents' house is but a log cabin with a dirt floor. When she moves in with her brother, her room is not a part of the main house: "She slept in a leanto room at the back of the house" (p. 3). When she begins to have sexual relations, a natural activity for her, she does so in an unconventional way, since her activity is unconventional in the eyes of the community. In a scene which foreshadows Joe's escape through his bedroom window at the McEachern's, Lena climbs through her bedroom window. She uses the same method of escape when she leaves her brother's home permanently: "She could have departed by the door, by daylight. Nobody would have stopped her. Perhaps she knew that. But she chose to go by night, and through the window" (p. 4).

Unable to find Lucas after a month on the road, Lena pauses at Joe's rustic cabin, significantly not a house, for the birth of her child. Michael Millgate believes that "something more than the mere establishment of a weak narrative link seems to be involved in Lena's occupation of the cabin on the Burden estate and the

birth there of her child." He goes on to ask:

Is there, perhaps, some sense in which Faulkner intended the ritualistic murder of Joanna Burden, carried out as Lena Grove pauses overnight on the outskirts of the town, to be an act preparatory to the replacement of Miss Burden's alien, outmoded, and sterile influence by the natural vitality and fecundity embodied in Lena?<sup>13</sup>

The answer seems to be plain. Yes, Joanna Burden's death and the burning of her house signify the end of sterile alienation, at least for Byron Bunch and the Reverend Gail Hightower. Byron seems almost aware that the pillar of smoke from Joanna's house carries such significance when he tells Hightower about meeting Lena:

"And me blabbing on, with that smoke right yonder in plain sight like it was put there to warn me . . . (p. 72), and later: "It seemed to him that fate, circumstance, had set a warning in the sky all day long in that pillar of yellow smoke, and he too stupid to read it" (p. 77). Fortunately, Byron does not heed the warning and becomes increasingly involved with Lena and with life.

Even the minor characters of Light in August are reflected by their houses. The house in which Joe was born reflects the psyche of his grandfather, Doc Hines. Both Joe's mother and grandmother are forced to abide by Doc Hines' beliefs just as they are forced to remain within the walls of his house. Doc Hines refuses to allow his wife to go out for the doctor, who is needed to save their daughter Milly's life. Mrs. Hines later relates the incident to Gail Hightower, telling him that when she tried to go out the front door, her husband told her:

"Get back into that house. Let the devil gather his own crop: he was the one that laid it by." And I tried to get out the back way and he heard me and run around the house with the gun and hit me with the barrel of it and I went back to Milly and he stood outside the hall door where he could see Milly until she died. (p. 358)

Joe's mother thus dies as a direct result of the grandfather's refusal to allow anyone to interfere with his interpretation of divine will.

Doc and Mrs. Hines now live "in a small bungalow in a neighborhood of negroes . . . in filthy poverty and complete idleness" (p. 322). The walk is full of "rotting bricks and shards of concrete" (p. 327). None of the townspeople know anything about the pair for certain, and

the house is forbidden territory, figuratively speaking, for the community. When the townspeople bring a semi-conscious Doc Hines back to his home, Mrs. Hines refuses to allow them near the house: "Just before they reached the porch the front door opened and his wife came out and closed the door behind her. . . . She stood before the door as if she were barring them from the house . . . ." (p. 327). She carries him inside herself and needlessly returns to lock the front door (pp. 328-29). The inside of the house is described as "dark and small and rankly-odored as a cave" (p. 329), an apt description of Doc Hines' psyche. His closed mindedness, seen earlier in his conduct toward his daughter, remains unshaken; his tirades against bitchery and abomination continue unabated throughout his life. He still believes himself to be God's personal spokesman:

going singlehanded into remote negro churches and interrupting the service to enter the pulpit and in his harsh, dead voice and at times with violent obscenity, . . . preaching the superiority of the white race, himself his own exhibit A, in fanatic and unconscious paradox. (p. 325)

The decay and isolation of the house reflect the physical and mental isolation of Doc and Mrs. Hines.

Even the psychology of such minor characters as Mrs. Hightower and Lucas Burch is developed through imagery related to houses. When faced with a situation they find intolerable, they make an

escape through a window. Lucas, confronted with Lena and his baby in the cabin, finds himself trapped by the representative of civil law, the sheriff, and by his moral obligation to Lena and the child. He cannot make a direct exit, and after mumbling a few jumbled words to Lena, he climbs out the back window of the cabin. Mrs. Hightower, driven to the city in a vain attempt to find love, eventually escapes from an intolerable life by jumping to her death from a hotel window. The rented room in the hotel is as empty of love as was her relationship with her husband.

These unhappy bedroom scenes are contrasted to the final scene of the novel, in which a happily married couple is experiencing normal sexual relations. Most critics tend to ignore this scene with its addition of a new character in another location, but the change in character, location, and atmosphere serves an important function in the novel. Harry Nash, in his article "Faulkner's 'Furniture Repairer and Dealer': Knitting Up Light in August," offers three key reasons for ending the novel with this couple:

Most obviously, they help to restore a normal continuity and stability (in social and sexual terms). . . . They project a vigorous natural intimacy. . . . They reconstitute the novel's more or less central focus. The certain apocalyptic intensity of focus of the preceding twenty chapters is thereby dimmed, diffused, refracted, reset.<sup>14</sup>

This change of pace serves a Gothic purpose as well. As Elizabeth

MacAndrew observes, "When the tale is no longer set in the distant past, a system of 'nested,' concentric narration maintains the illusion of a strange world, isolating a symbolic landscape within the ordinary 'world.'"<sup>15</sup> The furniture repairer and dealer returns the reader from the closed, symbolic, Gothic world of Jefferson to the normal outside world, making the world of Jefferson more alien by comparison.

The imagery pertaining to houses throughout the novel shows that although Faulkner clearly used them in the Gothic manner, as a symbol of the inhabitant, their symbolism is more pervasive and complex than this alone. In addition to reflecting the psyche of the inhabitant, the houses of Light in August also occasionally represent the psyche of the perceiver. The Burden house is but one example of this. As a symbol of Joanna, the house represents both her body and her mind, and is the scene of both her physical liberation and her entrapment by the past. But to the townspeople the Burden house, as the house of an abolitionist, threatens their way of life. For Byron, the smoke from her burning house symbolizes the end of his isolation from life. For Joe, her house evokes the feelings of contamination and confinement he associates with women.

Additionally, houses are used as symbols of social life, as opposed to the natural life represented by the outside world. This use is most clearly seen by Lena Grove's relationship to houses and the natural world. As a symbol of the "natural," Lena is essentially houseless. On the other hand, both Joanna Burden and



Gail Hightower, although isolated from the community and from life by their "dark houses," nonetheless discover "life," or a sense of community, in their kitchens. Joanna finds Joe there, and is physically awakened; Hightower's kitchen, where he encounters and attempts to save Joe, becomes a place of life for him, the scene of his psychological rebirth. But these "wombs," to use Fiedler's terminology, are also "tombs" in that both Joanna Burden and Gail Hightower, as well as Joe, are destroyed as a result of their discoveries. Their deaths are symbolically appropriate in a Jefferson which lacks the true spirit of Christianity, as symbolized by the empty church steeples, even the Church is a "dark house." Since the buildings throughout the novel are so deeply symbolic, "Dark House," with its Gothic implications, remains an apt title for Light in August.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Robert D. Hume, "Gothic Versus Romantic: A Revaluation of the Gothic Novel," PMLA, 84 (March 1969), 282.

<sup>2</sup>For a complete discussion of Gothic literature, its history, themes, values, and devices, see Edith Birkhead, The Tale of Terror: A Study of Gothic Romance; Robert D. Hume, "Gothic Versus Romantic: A Revaluation of the Gothic Novel," PMLA, 84 (March 1969), pp. 282-90; Elizabeth MacAndrew, The Gothic Tradition in Fiction; Irving Malin, New American Gothic; Eino Railo, The Haunted Castle: A Study of the Elements of English Romanticism; Montague Summers, The Gothic Quest; G.R. Thompson, ed., The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism; Varma Devendra, The Gothic Flame, Being a History of the Gothic Novel in England: Its Origins, Efflorescence, Disintegration, and Residuary Influences.

<sup>3</sup>Hume, p. 286.

<sup>4</sup>MacAndrew, The Gothic Tradition in Fiction, explains Walpole's use of a Gothic castle in The Castle of Otranto as follows:

The central device in Otranto became the most famous of all Gothic devices: the identification of the castle or house with its owner. The castle in Walpole's novel is

Manfred. The wife and daughter he dominates so completely are confined to it almost entirely, as if they lived and breathed and had their being within his personality. The comings and goings of other characters, demanding entrance, fleeing secretively, appearing suddenly, directly reflect their relations with him. And finally, as the novel ends in Manfred's moral collapse, the castle, disobeying the laws of nature, collapses too, disintegrating into rubble as other such buildings would do in later novels.

<sup>5</sup>Leslie A. Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, p. 132.

<sup>6</sup>Railo, The Haunted Castle, p. 171.

<sup>7</sup>For a discussion of other Gothic elements in Faulkner's fiction, see David L. Frazier, "Gothicism in Sanctuary: The Black Pall and the Crap Table," Modern Fiction Studies, 2 (Autumn 1956), 114-24; Elizabeth M. Kerr, William Faulkner's Gothic Domain; J. Douglas Perry, "Gothic as Vortex: The Form of Horror in Capote, Faulkner and Styron," Modern Fiction Studies, 19 (Summer 1973), 153-67; Max Putzel, "What is Gothic about Absalom, Absalom!?" Southern Literary Journal, 4 (Fall 1971), 3-19.

<sup>8</sup>David L. Minter, William Faulkner: His Life and Work, pp. 129, 153. Elizabeth Kerr discusses such Gothic elements in Light in August as Hightower's house functioning as a haunted castle;

Joe Christmas' complex dual psyche; Gail Hightower as the modern equivalent of the life-denying monk prominent in Gothic fiction; the tyrannical fathers of Gothic fiction in the persons of Doc Hines and Simon McEachern; Percy Grimm and the cruelty of Gothic inquisitors; Bobbie Allen as the familiar prostitute of Gothic fiction and Joanna Burden as the Evil Woman; murder, flight and pursuit, and the issue of unknown parentage as staples in the Gothic tradition; and Gothic violence and symbolic landscapes and the dream-like atmosphere surrounding Hightower's visions. She concludes by observing that incest is the only significant Gothic theme which Faulkner omitted from the novel (pp. 107-136).

<sup>9</sup>Kerr, William Faulkner's Gothic Domain, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup>William Faulkner, Light in August (New York: Modern Library 1959), p. 42. All further quotations from Light in August will be from this edition, which is reproduced photographically from a copy of the first printing in 1932.

<sup>11</sup>Francois Pitavy, Faulkner's Light in August, uses this passage to show that "The setting eventually assumes aspects of the characters living in it and even becomes an extension or projection of their essential being" (p. 90). He assumes, however, that the house has acquired the personality of both Joe's foster parents.

<sup>12</sup>Pitavy, p. 105.

<sup>13</sup>Michael Millgate, "Faulkner's Light in August," from Twentieth Century Interpretations of Light in August, ed. David L. Minter, pp. 79-80.

<sup>14</sup>Harry Nash, "Faulkner's 'Furniture Repairer and Dealer': Knitting Up Light in August," Modern Fiction Studies, 16 (Winter 1971), 529.

<sup>15</sup>MacAndrew, p. 48.

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